

# VINOGRAPHY: a wine blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world

06.17.2013

## Passopisciaro Winery, Etna, Sicily: Current Releases



Andrea Franchetti is worrying about a door.

It's two days before the Contrada dell'Etna, the main seasonal tasting of Etna wines, and Franchetti is hosting the event at his winery, in the new salon behind his main winery building. A crew of workers is busy pressure testing the fountain that has also recently been installed in the courtyard in the fading light of the afternoon.

My Italian is poor, so I can't quite tell just how annoyed the soft-spoken Franchetti is, but it's clear he's not happy that the doors to his tasting salon are hanging a good inch above the marble floors.

He's asking some stern and perhaps slightly exasperated questions of one of his workman while wearing a blue sport coat, a pink shirt, thick-rimmed black eyeglasses that are half nerdy, half chic, and if the massive white bandage on his nose is any indication, having just completed some sort of minor surgical procedure on his face.



The scene balances right on the edge of comedy, but doesn't topple over the line into farce, if only because Franchetti seems at once both entirely earnest, and not the least self-conscious about the whole thing. He's clearly really excited about the upcoming event and wants things to go right.

Franchetti follows me into the modest tasting room at [Passopisciaro Winery](#) that sits at the back of his ancient stone winery, and after a bit of what is clearly antsy, asks if perhaps I'd like to taste the wines with one of his marketing folks, and then after have a conversation. He is clearly worried about his door, and I am more than happy to focus on the wines first. With a relieved smile, he heads back out into the courtyard, and I sit down to his remarkable lineup of wines.

Andrea Franchetti is acknowledged as one of the early pioneers in the current renaissance of Etna wines. Which, given the youth of the industry, means that he's been making wine on Etna since 2001, which was the year after he came to Sicily on vacation and couldn't manage to cool down.

"I went to Syracuse on vacation and it was too hot," he says. "I kept driving around looking for someplace that was less hot. I turned the corner and it got much colder, and there were vineyards everywhere. Right away, you could see how extraordinary it was for wine."

Franchetti had already proven to the world the quality of his intuition about terroir.

"I had a ruin of a house, and I mean a *ruin*, in Tuscany that I bought in 1981" he says. "I went to work distributing wine in New York for 12 years, and when I came back to that ruin, I always felt like I never wanted to go back to a city. So I basically came up with a way to stay there. I went to Bordeaux and learned a bit about making wine. I'll give you a hint -- the most interesting thing you can do in Bordeaux is pruning and doing the vines -- that was my most important learning."

In 1992, Franchetti planted a vineyard in an unremarkable sheep pasture in the Val d'Orcia region of Tuscany, east of Montalcino near the border with Umbria. From the Bordeaux varieties he planted there, with an emphasis on Cabernet Franc, Franchetti created the critically acclaimed Tenuta di Trinoro, a wine which played a role in the rise of the Super Tuscan movement in the region. Called "the Tuscan Cheval Blanc" by some admirers, Tenuta di Trinoro brought Franchetti to international prominence as a singleminded, if somewhat eccentric winemaker to watch.

On Etna, you might say he found his second calling. But it took him a little while to understand what the place was telling him.

"To be honest, I wasn't really interested in the local varieties," says Franchetti, "I just thought Etna would be a good place for winemaking. Everything here on Etna was for sale -- completely abandoned. This property was all decrepit. The person who sold it to me named a figure and I offered him 25% of the price, and he said OK. The problem with Etna is that it is so difficult to work here."



Franchetti started rehabilitating the old vineyards -- clearing brush and overgrowth, and sculpting a vision of what kind of wine he wanted to make.

"I thought it was all going to be Franchetti," he says, gesturing to what is one of the best bottles of Petite Verdot I've ever tasted in my life -- massive, dense, supple, and bursting with flavor. "It was going to be wine that was big, something with skins, a wine with a lot of matter. I imagined it would be the wine that I was used to making."

"I tried for years to turn Nerello [Mascalese] into that sort of wine and failed" he continues with a grin. "But then I realized I had to go the other way completely, to make this sort of white wine that is Nerello. The skins of the grape are bitter, so you don't really want to do too much maceration or extraction. You can't leave lees in suspension. You pull it right away after fermentation, put it into big vessels and get the lees out of the way."



"I was in Bordeaux for two years," he offers by way of explanation for how he found his way to a place where he finally understood what Etna was all about. "I was lucky I didn't go through a university or a school [to learn winemaking]. When you get a sense of what it is all about, you look for the essential things and don't worry about the unknown. You follow your own light. I've been making wine now for 25 years, and once I realized this was the way to do it, it became a matter of avoiding things. It's just a matter of being gentle."

Franchetti's winemaking regimen at Passopisciaro involves, like many of the best producers on the mountain, a very late harvest of grapes, a very gentle fermentation using commercial yeasts (Franchetti isn't happy with what he feels are acetone aromas he gets from native yeasts) and a quick racking off to big oak casks where the wines finish their secondary fermentations. Franchetti has also come to believe fining is quite important to his wines, which he does with both egg whites and bentonite clay.



It's a good thing Franchetti has an affinity for ruins. To say the ancient farmhouse he purchased along with his first set of stone terraced vineyards just outside of the town of Passopisciaro needed a lot of work would be quite an understatement. But the place had a deep feeling of "rightness" to Franchetti, who liked the idea of farming on an old lava flow.



Lava flows, he quickly learned, are crucial to understanding both the geology and geography of Etna as a wine region.

"Historically, if you talk to the old-timers, Etna has these big properties that were the 'owned' properties," says Franchetti, describing the region when it was divided into large estates among the landed gentry. "There were these big lava flows and centuries later you purchased that flow and you could plant on it. Now they're all split up, but these flows, our *contradas* have always been mapped very carefully. Each is a distinct flow, and you can see the differences in the grapes."

Etna's *contradas* and their borders are well known amongst the local populace, and they function as de-facto sub-appellations of the region.

Even after learning how to make Nerello Mascalese, and after purchasing vineyards in several *contradas*, Franchetti still thought he would make a single wine by blending all his fruit, but three or four years ago Franchetti decided that each yielded such different wines that they needed to be bottled separately.

Franchetti now farms roughly 55 acres of vineyards spread across five different *contradas*: Chiappemacine, Porcaria, Guardiola, Sciaranuova, and Rampante, and beginning with his 2011 vintage, he has begun clearly labeling each with its own identity, the first letter of the name of the *contrada*.



Franchetti's vineyards are like many of the gems of Etna. They've never seen a drop of pesticide among their 80 to 90 year-old gnarled, head-trained vines that scabble into the powdery, shallow soil on top of terraces that climb the volcano. Some of the vineyard plantings are quite dense, to the tune of 12,000 plants per hectare, and like all of the vineyards on the mountain, they are dry farmed.

Much of Franchetti's acreage lies just outside of the borders of the Etna DOC region, leading him to bottle his wines simply as Sicily IGT. Ironically, just as with his Tuscan project, Franchetti seems to have discovered Grand Cru quality outside the demarcated bounds of pedigree.

He makes about 7000 cases of wine each year, of which his Passopisciaro wine that blends fruit from his many vineyards makes up the bulk of production. In addition to this wine, he produces a Chardonnay from the vineyards surrounding the winery, the five single vineyard wines, and somewhat amusingly (only until you taste it) the kind of wine that Franchetti thought he would be making when he first decided to farm Etna: a Petit Verdot which simply bears his name. It's a bit of a red herring, but a damn tasty one.

Franchetti has come a long way with Etna, and Etna has come a long way, too.

"This place has boomed in a way that I have never seen anything like it," he muses. "I went through the cult wines era of the Nineties, and I've never seen a place launch itself like this. It's crazy, and it's amazing. Six years ago, no one knew about this place. Now there are sixty producers finding their way. Now there are fancy people who have come with money. We've got all possible kinds of producers here -- the Planetas and the Tascas [d'Almerita - the two largest producers in Sicily] and the new successful guy who wants to make a chateau. We've even got fancy winemakers who are the local version of Michel Rolland. We've got everything."

So where is Passopisciaro going? Not far.

"It's just the right size now," says Franchetti. "I'm doing the kinds of wines I like to make. I won't get bigger. I think that's good."

Franchetti, in the end, seems the master of modest understatement. His wines are nothing short of remarkable, and sit among the very best that are made each year on Etna. As I tasted through his 2011 wines (from what many have said is the best vintage Etna has seen in a decade or more) I kept waiting for a wine to NOT take my breath away, but each seemed as remarkable as the last. They positively radiate the unique terroir of Etna even as they completely seduce with pleasure. There are few guarantees in life, and fewer in wine, but the name Passopisciaro on a bottle of Sicilian wine will never steer you wrong.

TASTING NOTES:

**2011 Passopisciaro "Guardiola" Chardonnay, Sicily**

Pale greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of green and yellow apples with lemon curd and wet stones. In the mouth bright lemon zest and lemon curd flavors mix with pink grapefruit and bright wet stone qualities. Juicy, bright and crisp with fantastic acidity. 100% Chardonnay grown at 1000 meters. Stays in big oak barrels for a month to go through malolactic fermentation and then ages in cement before bottling. 13% alcohol. Score: between **8.5** and **9**. Cost: \$40. [click to buy](#).

**2010 Passopisciaro Rosso, Sicily**

Palest ruby in color, approaching a rosé, this wine smells of dried flowers, mixed berries, and wet stones. In the mouth, bright berries have a sweetness to their aroma that is quite compelling, along with flavors of crushed rocks and dried herbs. Wonderfully balanced and bright, with a gorgeous texture and quite supple powdery

tannins 100% Nerello Mascalese that spends 18 months in large 50hl oak casks. 14% alcohol. Score:



between

9 and 9.5. Cost: \$35. [click to buy.](#)

**2011 Passopisciaro "Contrada C" Nerello Mascalese, Sicily**

Light ruby in the glass, this wine smells of crushed raspberries, alpine strawberries, lupines and other floral aromas. In the mouth, crushed stones take on flavors of raspberries, alpine strawberries and redcurrants along with mixed herbs. Leathery tannins surround the fruit. Gorgeous. Comes from a vineyard that is a mix of lava and limestone at the lower elevations of Etna at 550 meters in height. 100% Nerello Mascalese aged for 18 months in old oak casks. 14% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5. Cost: \$65.

**2011 Passopisciaro "Contrada P" Nerello Mascalese, Sicily**

Light ruby in the glass, this wine smells of floral perfume and sweet berries. In the mouth, gorgeously bright raspberry, redcurrant and other bright sour berry flavors burst on the palate thanks to extraordinary acidity. Deep crushed stone minerality vibrates underneath the fruit, while supple tannins linger along with mouth-puckering red fruit in the finish. Comes from a vineyard at 650 meters up the mountain and is 100% Nerello Mascalese aged for 18 months in large old oak casks. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$65

**2011 Passopisciaro "Contrada G" Nerello Mascalese, Sicily**

Light ruby in color, this wine smells of sweet vanilla and sweet raspberry aromas. In the mouth, beautifully bright raspberry and alpine strawberry flavors are electrically bright with fantastic acidity. Gorgeously bright and juicy, but also deeply stony and rocky. Hints of citrus oil linger in the finish. Comes from a vineyard at 800 meters up the mountain and is 100% Nerello Mascalese aged for 18 months in large old oak casks. 14% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$65

**2011 Passopisciaro "Contrada S" Nerello Mascalese, Sicily**

Light ruby in the glass, this wine smells of crushed rocks and only the hint of berry fruit. In the mouth the wine is incredibly mineral, with gorgeous wet chalkboard and pulverized stone flavors and powdery tannins that coat the palate. Through this haze of liquid rock emerges sweet redcurrant and wet wood flavor that is quite delicate. Fantastic acidity. Comes from a vineyard at 850 meters up the mountain close to one of the most recent lava flows on the mountain and is 100% Nerello Mascalese aged for 18 months in large old oak casks. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.5. Cost: \$65

**2011 Passopisciaro "Contrada R" Nerello Mascalese, Sicily**

Light ruby in color, this wine smells of exotic citrus peel and forest berries as well as pulverized rock. In the

mouth gorgeously citrus brightness of blood orange and redcurrant is amazingly bright thanks to fantastic acidity. The fruit tastes as if it is beamed through a crystalline lattice to the palate. Fairly grippy but supple tannins coat the mouth as the blood orange and mixed citrus lingers for minutes in the mouth. Comes from a vineyard at 1000 meters up the mountain and is 100% Nerello Mascalese aged for 18 months in large old oak casks. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around **9.5**. Cost: \$65

**2010 Passopisciaro "Franchetti" Petite Verdot, Sicily**

Opaque purple in the glass, this wine smells of cassis and wet earth. In the mouth, beautifully rich, but at the same time restrained, cassis and wet stone flavors have a wonderful velvety texture thanks to plush tannins and fantastic acidity. Beautifully balanced and harmonious. 100% Petite Verdot grown at 800 meters up Mount Etna, aged in 6-8 months in 100% new French oak for 8 months and then in cement until bottling. 15.5% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**. Cost: \$170. [click to buy](#).

The 2011 single contrada wines are not yet on the market, and given their limited production, they will likely be difficult to find in the US when they do arrive.



Posted by: [Alder](#) on June 17, 2013 11:29 PM